

In the United States Court of Federal Claims

OFFICE OF SPECIAL MASTERS

No. 21-0615V

(not to be published)

MARLENE SUTLIFF,

Petitioner,

v.

SECRETARY OF HEALTH AND
HUMAN SERVICES,

Respondent.

Chief Special Master Corcoran

Filed: May 11, 2023

Special Processing Unit (SPU);
Attorney's Fees and Costs; Hourly
Rates

Matthew F. Belanger, Faraci Lange, LLP, Rochester, NY, for Petitioner.

Jennifer A. Shah, U.S. Department of Justice, Washington, DC, for Respondent.

DECISION ON ATTORNEY'S FEES AND COSTS¹

On January 12, 2021, Marlene Sutliff filed a petition for compensation under the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, 42 U.S.C. §300aa-10, *et seq.*² (the "Vaccine Act"). Petitioner alleged that she suffered a shoulder injury related to vaccine administration as a result of an influenza vaccine that was administered to her on September 20, 2018. Petition at 1. On January 3, 2023, a decision was issued awarding compensation to Petitioner based on the parties' stipulation. ECF No. 38.

¹Because this Decision contains a reasoned explanation for the action taken in this case, it must be made publicly accessible and will be posted on the United States Court of Federal Claims' website, and/or at <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/collection/uscourts/national/cofc>, in accordance with the E-Government Act of 2002. 44 U.S.C. § 3501 note (2018) (Federal Management and Promotion of Electronic Government Services). **This means the Decision will be available to anyone with access to the internet.** In accordance with Vaccine Rule 18(b), Petitioner has 14 days to identify and move to redact medical or other information, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of privacy. If, upon review, I agree that the identified material fits within this definition, I will redact such material from public access.

² National Childhood Vaccine Injury Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-660, 100 Stat. 3755. Hereinafter, for ease of citation, all section references to the Vaccine Act will be to the pertinent subparagraph of 42 U.S.C. § 300aa (2012).

Petitioner has now filed a motion for attorney's fees and costs, dated March 15, 2023 (ECF No. 43), requesting a total award of \$13,571.00 (representing \$13,024.50 in fees and \$546.50 in costs). In accordance with General Order No. 9, Petitioner filed a signed statement indicating that Petitioner incurred no out-of-pocket expenses. ECF No. 43-4. Respondent reacted to the motion on March 29, 2023, indicating that he is satisfied that the statutory requirements for an award of attorney's fees and costs are met in this case, but deferring resolution of the amount to be awarded to my discretion. ECF No. 44. Petitioner did not file a reply thereafter.

I have reviewed the billing records submitted with Petitioner's requests and find a reduction in the amount of fees to be awarded appropriate, for the reason listed below.

ANALYSIS

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney's fees and costs. Section 15(e). Counsel must submit fee requests that include contemporaneous and specific billing records indicating the service performed, the number of hours expended on the service, and the name of the person performing the service. *See Savin v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 85 Fed. Cl. 313, 316-18 (2008). Counsel should not include in their fee requests hours that are "excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary." *Saxton v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 3 F.3d 1517, 1521 (Fed. Cir. 1993) (quoting *Hensley v. Eckerhart*, 461 U.S. 424, 434 (1983)). It is "well within the special master's discretion to reduce the hours to a number that, in [her] experience and judgment, [is] reasonable for the work done." *Id.* at 1522. Furthermore, the special master may reduce a fee request *sua sponte*, apart from objections raised by respondent and without providing a petitioner notice and opportunity to respond. *See Sabella v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 86 Fed. Cl. 201, 209 (2009). A special master need not engage in a line-by-line analysis of petitioner's fee application when reducing fees. *Broekelschen v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 102 Fed. Cl. 719, 729 (2011).

The petitioner "bears the burden of establishing the hours expended, the rates charged, and the expenses incurred." *Wasson v. Sec'y of Health & Human Servs.*, 24 Cl. Ct. 482, 484 (1991). The Petitioner "should present adequate proof [of the attorney's fees and costs sought] at the time of the submission." *Wasson*, 24 Cl. Ct. at 484 n.1. Petitioner's counsel "should make a good faith effort to exclude from a fee request hours that are excessive, redundant, or otherwise unnecessary, just as a lawyer in private practice ethically is obligated to exclude such hours from his fee submission." *Hensley*, 461 U.S. at 434.

ATTORNEY FEES

A. Hourly Rates

Petitioner requests the rate of \$375 per hour for time billed from 2019-23 by attorney Matthew Belanger. ECF No. 43-1 at 3. For associate attorney Kathryn Bruns, Petitioner requests the rate of \$300 per hour for time billed in 2019. *Id.*

The requested rate for Mr. Belanger has been awarded in previous Vaccine Program cases and shall be awarded herein. However, Ms. Bruns has been previously awarded the rate of \$275 per hour for time billed in 2018 and 2019 – less than what is requested herein. See *Davis v. Sec’y of Health & Human Servs.*, No. 20-0994V, 2023 WL 4349599 (Fed. Cl. Spec. Mstr. Aug. 17, 2023). I agree with the reasoning from these prior cases, and therefore reduce the requested rates to what has been previously awarded. Application of these rates results in a reduction of **\$110.00**.³ The rate requested for 2020-23 is reasonable and shall be awarded herein.

ATTORNEY COSTS

Petitioner requests \$546.50 in overall costs. ECF No. 61-2 at 16. This amount is comprised of obtaining medical records and the Court’s filing fee. I have reviewed all of the requested costs and find them to be reasonable and shall award them in full.

CONCLUSION

The Vaccine Act permits an award of reasonable attorney’s fees and costs for successful claimants. Section 15(e). Accordingly, I hereby GRANT IN PART Petitioner’s Motion for attorney’s fees and costs. I award a total of **\$13,461.00** (representing \$12,914.50 in fees and \$546.50 in costs) as a lump sum in the form of a check jointly payable to Petitioner and Petitioner’s counsel, Matthew F. Belanger. In the absence of a timely-filed motion for review (see Appendix B to the Rules of the Court), the Clerk of Court shall enter judgment in accordance with this Decision.⁴

³ This amount consists of $(\$498 - \$470 = \$28 \times 7.30\text{hrs} = \$204.40) + (\$229 - \$200 = \$29 \times 28.50\text{hrs} = \$826.50) = \$1,030.90$.

⁴ Pursuant to Vaccine Rule 11(a), the parties may expedite entry of judgment by filing a joint notice renouncing their right to seek review.

IT IS SO ORDERED.

s/Brian H. Corcoran

Brian H. Corcoran
Chief Special Master